

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Species: Elk

Region: 1

Hunting District: HD's 130, 140, 141, 150, and 151

Year: 2015

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

This proposal addresses the population objectives for elk within hunting districts 130, 140, 141, 150, and 151. The 2005 Management Plan for elk describes the population objectives as follows:

- 1) HDs 130, 140, and 141: Maintain an average (3-year) of 225 elk observed during post-season aerial surveys.
- 2) HDs 150 and 151: Maintain an average (3-year) of 400 elk observed during post-season aerial surveys.

The proposed changes are as follows:

- 1) HDs 130, 140, and 141: Maintain a post-hunting season population of 150-320 observed elk.
- 2) HDs 150 and 151: Maintain a post-hunting season population of 310-500 observed elk.

Historic spring counts of elk in the South Fork of the Flathead River drainage have ranged from 391 individuals in 1975 to 1415 in 1984 (Table 1). By the late 1980's, the population began to decline and has remained relatively constant since 2000, with an average of 635 elk between 2002 and 2014. While we do not typically survey HDs 130, 141, and 151, a spring survey in 2010 revealed a minimum count of 14 elk in HD 151 and 18 elk in HD 141, indicating that most elk in the area winter in HDs 140 and 150. Therefore, based on the available trend data, the current population objectives are low, and it is likely that the available habitat can support larger numbers of elk in the above listed hunting districts.

Table 1. Numbers of elk observed during spring surveys in the South Fork of the Flathead River.

Year	HD 140		HD 150		South Fork Total	
	Total	Calves:100 Cows	Total	Calves:100 Cows	Total	Calves:100 Cows
1960	164		652	20	816	20
1961	122	18	329	27	451	24
1962	300	21	509	20	809	20
1963						
1964		24		16		19
1965	107	27	210	15	317	21
1966	211	25	255	17	466	20
1967	139	16	197	26	336	22
1968	202	28	275	34	477	32
1969	286	29	268	24	554	26
1970	241	44	342	28	583	34
1971	266	26	269	24	535	25
1972	219	25	390	12	609	17
1973	230	28	591	25	821	26
1974	252	28	307	35	559	31
1975	159	28	232	23	391	25
1976	122	11	141	16	263	15
1977	235	22	387	25	622	24
1978	283	36	336	26	619	31
1979	317	25	488	26	805	26
1980	258	9	417	26	675	18
1981	291	29	900	28	1191	29
1982	431	25	363	19	794	22
1983	436	20	749	24	1185	23
1984	327	31	1088	26	1415	28
1985	305	24	869	18	1174	20
1986	311	40	875	36	1186	37
1987	188	20	702	18	890	19
1988	318	49	1052	38	1370	41
1989	412	40	949	28	1361	32
1990	419	35	708	24	1127	27
1991	435	23	650	9	1085	13
1992	429	34	608	23	1037	27
1993	358	38	525	21	883	25
1994	214	40	513	27	727	31
1995	245	32	555		800	32

1996			298	18		18
1997	179	22	269	16		18
1998			250	11		11
1999	224	22	188	35		27
2000	253	25	352	32	605	29
2001			226	23		23
2002	223	27				27
2003	153	31	510	24	663	28
2004	344	33	466	28	810	30
2005						
2006						
2007						
2008	120	14	280	13	400	14
2009	301	3	355	5	656	4
2010	373	22	283	19	656	20
2011	225	11	326	8	551	9
2012	210	12	472	38	682	29
2013	185	17	435	18	620	17
2014	201	15	482	16	683	16

2. What is the objective of this proposed change?

The purpose of this change is to align the population objective with current and historic population numbers that the habitat can realistically support. The current population would hold elk numbers at an artificially low level. Since this area is wilderness and public lands, there is no concern with maintaining low numbers to avoid game damage on private property.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured?

The population will be monitored through annual post hunting aerial surveys in HDs 140 and 150.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives?

The population has consistently been above management objectives (see Table 1).

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

These hunting districts provide wilderness hunting experiences for both resident and non-resident hunters. The current management objective would force us to liberalize harvest regimes allowing for an over-harvest to reduce current elk numbers. Therefore, there would initially be an increase in harvest opportunity, but in the long run, hunting opportunity would decline due to lower population numbers.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Submitted by: Jessy Coltrane, Kalispell Area Biologist

Date:

Approved: _____
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: _____
Name / Date

Reason for Modification:

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Species: Elk

Region: 2

Hunting District: HDs 204/261 (Rock Creek EMU)

Year: 2015

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.)

- ☐ Assign management objectives to each district independently, removing the three sub-regions in these two districts that have their own objectives (204 north of Ambrose, 204/261 Ambrose to Willow, 261 Willow to Skalkaho).
- ☐ The proposed objectives are 600 elk in HD 204 and 700 elk in HD 261.
- ☐ Amend the objective calf: cow ratio to a range of acceptable values (20-30 calves: 100 cows).
- ☐ Raise the objective bull: cow ratio from 10 bulls: 100 cows to 15 bulls: 100 cows for both districts.

2. Why is the proposed change necessary?

The original separation of these two districts into three management sub-regions was due to high elk densities on private land causing game damage problems in north 204 and south 261. However, this separation is not translatable into effective harvest regulations for these areas and may be viewed as an unnecessary complication to season and quota changes. Game damage goals may be met through allocation of B-licenses and antlerless harvest to private lands only or other targeted harvest strategies, as well as future adoption of public land “sub-objectives” to prevent the decline of publicly-accessible elk in these districts.

Also, amending the objective calf: cow ratio to a range of acceptable values (changing from a static 25 calves: 100 cows to a range of 20-30 calves: 100 cows) allows for slight year-to-year variation under variable survey conditions without necessitating reactive harvest regulation changes.

Increasing the objective bull: cow ratio will encourage a targeted antlerless harvest to reduce population, the success of which would be manifested in a higher proportion of bulls.

3. What is the current population’s status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if

applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Table 1. Populations by HD and sub-region, with bulls: 100 cows for whole HDs.

	ALL 204		Sub-regions			ALL 261	
Year	Total	B:C	North of Ambrose	Ambrose-Willow	Willow-Skalkaho	Total	B:C
2002	877	14	684	513	691	1011	17
2003	848	15	747	508	785	1192	21
2004	1019	26*	682	584	655	902	40*
2005	850	18	688	475	631	944	20
2006	750	37*	508	507	529	794	52*
2007	801	21	438	569	527	733	28
2008	706	24	429	437	465	625	113*
2009	680	13	390	413	444	567	28
2010	610	13	466	362	527	745	16
2011	788	18	474	498	534	718	20
2012	798	18	494	515	487	698	26
2013	680	20	363	490	493	725	16
2014	887	20	540	519	575	764	32
2015	981	19	717	487	556	842	18

*=many elk unclassified, yielding skewed bull:cow ratio.

Along with HD 240 in the Bitterroot EMU, HDs 204 and 261 are the only Bitterroot districts with unrestricted bull harvest and archery/youth antlerless harvest (as well as limited B-licenses). Harvest has remained fairly steady in recent years, with stable bull:cow and calf: cow ratios (excluding years with high numbers of unclassified elk) observed during spring trend counts.

Combined, the total observed population in HDs 204 and 261 (1,760 elk) exceeds the current objective of 1,320. In the last spring count, 717 elk were counted north of Ambrose Creek in HD 204 (current objective 400 elk) and 556 were counted south of Willow Creek in HD 261 (current objective 400 elk). The elk in the middle section were counted at 487, just below the objective of 520 elk.

Compared to the proposed objectives, the 981 elk in HD 204 would exceed the objective of 600 by 64%, and the 842 elk in HD 261 would exceed the objective of 700 by 20%. Thus, private land-targeted harvest would be appropriate in each district to bring the populations down to objective.

- 4. Provide information related to any weather / habitat factors that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, temperature / precipitation information).**

Typical of the Bitterroot Valley, winters for many years have been mild and conducive to a growing elk population. Winterkill has never been a big factor in the Bitterroot Valley. The biggest management challenge is elk that find refuge on private land that does not allow or has very limited hunting. Hunter access is excellent on public land.

5. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

FWP met with the Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association specific to this proposal on June 8, 2015. At that meeting, formal consensus was reached to support the separation of 204 and 261 into separate management objectives of 600 and 700, respectively, as well as amendments to objective bull:cow and calf:cow ratios. These proposals were presented to and agreed upon by the North Sapphires Working Group in July, acknowledging that they may be reexamined upon the completion of the elk research project currently underway in HDs 204 and 261. Finally, a working group of landowners and sportsmen interested in elk management in the North Bitterroot (specifically 262 and 260), who met on July 8, also agreed to accept the proposals for 204 and 261, acknowledging reexamination in response to the completion of the research project.

Submitted by _____Rebecca Mowry_____

Date: _____July 9, 2015_____

Approved: _____
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: _____
Name / Date

Reason for modification:

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Species: Elk

Region: 2

Hunting District: HD 240 (Bitterroot EMU)

Year: 2015

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.)

- ☐ Increase the population objective from 750 elk to 1,000.
- ☐ Amend the objective calf: cow ratio to a range of acceptable values (20-30 calves: 100 cows).

2. Why is the proposed change necessary?

District boundary changes were implemented in fall 2014, designed to capture herd movements across the original 250/240 line (which frequently skewed annual trend surveys), reflect population dynamics of Bitterroot vs. West Fork elk herds, and allow increased flexibility to manage elk in areas experiencing game damage problems (and which, because of HD250 restrictions, were inaccessible). Because of these changes, the total area in HD 240 increased, adding approximately 5-30% to the population observed during spring trend counts (Table 1). The proposed objective of 1,000 increases the previous objective by 33%, which only slightly exceeds this proportion.

Table 1. Elk observed on spring trend counts in HD 240 (old and new boundaries).

Year	<2014 HD240 boundary total	Elk in old HD250 portion	Current HD240 boundary
2002	650	295	945
2003	930	211	1141
2004	1016	199	1215
2005	948	116	1064
2006	774	96	870
2007	682	120	802
2008	460	138	598
2009	645	66	711
2010	695	9	704
2011	719	24	743
2012	583	58	656
2013	525	217	742
2014	578	182	760

2015	715	240	955
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Also, amending the objective calf: cow ratio to a range of acceptable values (changing from a static 25 calves: 100 cows to a range of 20-30 calves: 100 cows) allows for slight year-to-year variation under variable survey conditions without necessitating reactive harvest regulation changes.

3. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

The population is currently just below the population objective (but within the 20% range; 715 if using old boundaries and objective of 750; 955 if using new boundaries and proposed objective of 1,000). Along with HDs 204 and 261 in the Sapphire EMU, HD 240 is one of the few Bitterroot districts with unrestricted bull harvest and archery/youth antlerless harvest (as well as limited B-licenses), and harvest has remained fairly steady in recent years, with stable bull:cow and calf: cow ratios observed during spring trend counts.

4. Provide information related to any weather / habitat factors that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, temperature / precipitation information).

Typical of the Bitterroot Valley, winters for many years have been mild and conducive to a growing elk population. Winterkill has never been a big factor in the Bitterroot Valley. The biggest management challenge is elk that find refuge on private land that does not allow or has very limited hunting. Additionally, the rugged canyons and proximity to designated wilderness in HD 240 contributes to difficult hunter access and a high level of security on public lands during hunting seasons.

5. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

FWP met with the Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association specific to this proposal on June 8, 2015. At that meeting, formal consensus was reached to support the proposal for raising the objective in this district to 1,000 elk as well as amend the objective calf: cow ratio. On July 7, this proposal was presented to and accepted by a group of local landowners and sportsmen at a public meeting in Darby.

Submitted by _____ Rebecca Mowry _____

Date: _____ July 9, 2015 _____

Approved: _____
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: _____
Name / Date

Reason for modification:

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Species: Elk

Region: 2

Hunting District: HD 250 (West Fork EMU)

Year: 2015

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.)

- ☐ Reduce the population objective from 2,000 elk to 1,400.
- ☐ Raise the objective bull:cow ratio to 25 bulls: 100 cows (previously 15).
- ☐ Increase the objective calf:cow ratio to 30-40 calves:100 cows (previously 25).

2. Why is the proposed change necessary?

Due to district boundary changes which were implemented in fall 2014, the total area in HD 250 has shrunk considerably, removing approximately 20-40% of the elk observed during spring trend counts (Table 1). The proposed objective of 1,400 reduces the previous objective by 30%, fitting this proportion of elk lost.

Since the restrictive bull harvest regulations were implemented, HD250 has developed into a popular “trophy” district, with 462 applicants for the 25 permits in 2014. Conversations with local landowners and sportsmen suggest a high degree of support for maintaining this district with limited bull regulations, citing concern that removing restrictions might result in a sudden and dramatic influx of hunters and a potential overharvest of bulls. This concern was further exacerbated by the substantial decrease in the size of the district following the boundary change. As such, increasing the bull:cow objective to 25 would help protect this segment.

Amending the objective calf: cow ratio from a static 25 to a range of 30-40 calves: 100 cows is necessary due to the nature of the habitat in HD 250, where harsher weather/terrain and high predator densities may dramatically affect recruitment from year to year, preventing harvest from becoming additive and resulting in steep declines following a particularly harsh season.

Table 1. Elk observed on spring trend counts in HD 250 (old and new boundaries).

Year	<2014 HD250 boundary total	Elk in new 240 portion	Elk in new 270 portion	Current HD250 boundary	Calves:100 cows
2002	1574	295	383	896	27

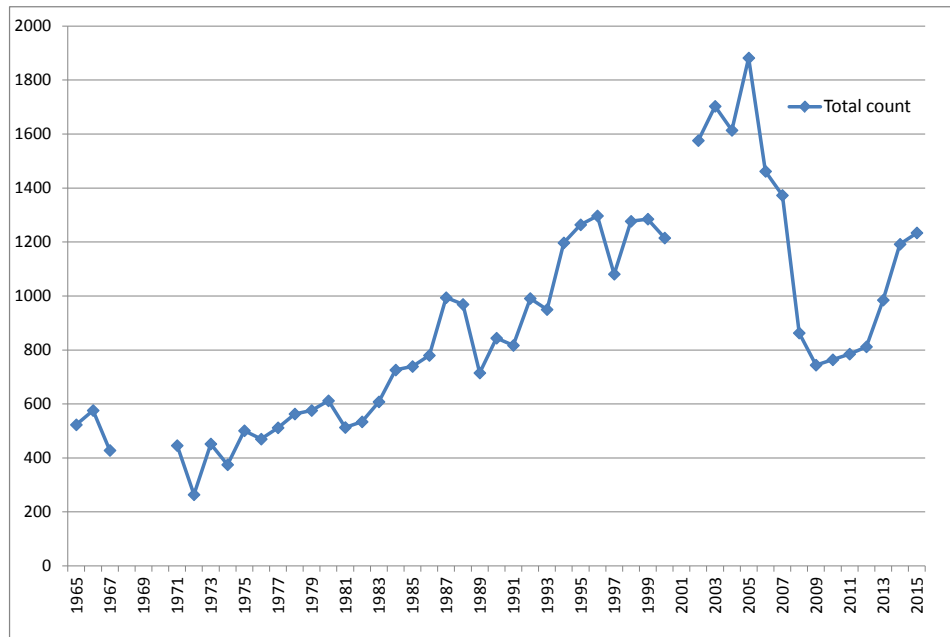
2003	1703	211	421	1071	22
2004	1599	199	336	1064	35
2005	1882	116	488	1278	27
2006	1458	96	326	1036	25
2007	1373	120	200	1053	13
2008	863	138	53	672	27
2009	744	66	133	545	8
2010	764	9	172	583	8
2011	785	24	164	597	17
2012	812	58	190	564	12
2013	985	217	159	609	33
2014	1192	182	287	723	30
2015	1234	240	265	729	29

3. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Since the objective of 2,000 elk was set in 2005, the elk have never reached it; the closest it came was 2005, when the population reached 1,882 animals. With the new boundaries, that population would have been 1,278 animals (Table 1). Prior to that, records from 1965 on indicate that elk in the West Fork never came close to 2,000 (Fig. 1). If the objective is set at the proposed 1,400, HD 250 would still be far below objective; however, recent surveys indicate the population may be improving following several years of low numbers and recruitment beginning in 2008.

Calf:cow ratios have been at or near the proposed objective range for the last three years.

Fig. 1. Trend counts of elk in HD250 (old district boundaries) from 1965-2015.



- 4. Provide information related to any weather / habitat factors that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, temperature / precipitation information).**

Compared to other districts in the Bitterroot, the habitat in HD 250 is much more heavily timbered, rugged, and may contain a lower quality of elk habitat, despite the higher levels of elk security during hunting season. Hunter access is excellent, and removal of restrictive harvest regulations may have immediate and dramatic effects on hunter harvest, necessitating great care in establishing and managing population objectives. Recent research suggests that high predator densities here, particularly mountain lions, may contribute to low recruitment.

- 5. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).**

FWP met with the Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association on June 8 and a group of local landowners and sportsmen at a public meeting in Darby on July 7. At these meetings, formal consensus was reached to propose lowering the objective in this district to 1,400 elk, raising the objective bull:cow ratio to 25, and raising the acceptable cow:calf ratio to 30-40.

Submitted by _____Rebecca Mowry_____

Date: _____July 9, 2015_____

Approved: _____
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: _____
Name / Date

Reason for modification:

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Species: Elk

Region: 2

Hunting District: HD 260

Year: 2015

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.)

- ☐ Set a population objective of 50 elk in this district.

2. Why is the proposed change necessary?

HD 260 is a narrow district located along the Bitterroot River from Hamilton in the south to Missoula in the north. Previously, elk counted in this district during spring trend counts were included in management unit 240 (Bitterroot EMU); however, many elk – particularly those in the northern portion – move west into 240 *or* east into 204/261 (Rock Creek EMU) or HD262 during spring and summer months, while some may remain in the river bottom throughout the year. Often, during spring trend counts, deciding which EMU to include these elk in depends on which side of the river they happen to be on during the survey. In recent years, numbers of elk counted in the river bottom on aerial trend counts has increased, suggesting more elk are taking refuge here during and following the general hunting season.

HD 260 is managed as an archery-only season. The predominance of private land in and adjacent to this district makes access difficult and has contributed to game damage problems within the district and in the adjacent HD262, and the fact that this unit does not have its own population objective has made management challenging. However, the habitat does support a number of ungulates including white-tailed deer and moose, suggesting that a minimal population of elk may be supported as well, and represents an important opportunity for bowhunters.

3. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

There is currently no management objective in this district. As mentioned previously, elk counted along the river bottom are typically added to HDs 240 or 204/261 depending on which side of the river they are on during the survey. As such, this fluid population can sometimes skew counts in the adjacent districts. For

this reason, it is important to consider these herds separately and monitor changes in population size year-to-year.

4. Provide information related to any weather / habitat factors that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, temperature / precipitation information).

Typical of the Bitterroot Valley, winters for many years have been mild and conducive to a growing elk population. Winterkill has never been a big factor in the Bitterroot Valley. The biggest management challenge across the area is elk that find refuge on private land that does not allow or has very limited hunting, and adverse weather events typically exacerbate game damage problems in HD 262 and 260.

5. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

FWP met with the Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association on June 8 and a working group of local sportsmen and landowners at Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge near Stevensville on July 8 (at which several representatives of the RCFWA were present). At these meeting, formal consensus was reached to support the proposal for creating an objective of 50 elk in this district, with no bull:cow or calf:cow objectives.

Submitted by _____Rebecca Mowry_____

Date: _____July 9, 2015_____

Approved: _____
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: _____
Name / Date

Reason for modification:

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Species: Elk

Region: 2

Hunting District: HD 262, proposed Bitterroot River Elk Management Unit (with HD 260)

Year: 2015

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.)

- ☐ Set a population objective of 0 elk in this new district.

2. Why is the proposed change necessary?

HD 262, located between Eastside Highway and the Big Ditch, was carved out of Rock Creek EMU districts 204 and 261 in 2014 in response to numerous game damage complaints on ranch and agricultural operations. This district is 100% private land, and most elk that cause damage during fall and winter typically reside in or near public land to the east for the remainder of the year and are usually found in 204 or 261 during the annual spring trend count (though some may reside along the river in HD260 throughout the year). This district will continue to be managed as a game damage district into the future, and setting an objective at 0 represents the landowner tolerance and FWP's desire to push elk away from farmlands.

3. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

As this is a new district, there is no previous management objective.

4. Provide information related to any weather / habitat factors that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, temperature / precipitation information).

Typical of the Bitterroot Valley, winters for many years have been mild and conducive to a growing elk population. Winterkill has never been a big factor in the Bitterroot Valley. The biggest management challenge across the area is elk that find refuge on private land that does not allow or has very limited hunting, and adverse weather events typically exacerbate problems in HD 262.

5. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

FWP met with the Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association on June 8 and a working group of local sportsmen and landowners at Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge near Stevensville on July 8, specific to this proposal. At these meetings, formal consensus was reached to support the proposal for creating an objective of 0 elk in this district.

Submitted by _____Rebecca Mowry_____

Date: _____July 9, 2015_____

Approved: _____
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: _____
Name / Date

Reason for modification:

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Species: Elk

Region: 2

Hunting District: HD 270, Sapphire Elk Management Unit (211, 214, 270, & 321)

Year: 2015

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.)

Clarify that broad guidance given in numbered paragraph 5, on page 55 of the Final Elk Management Plan (January 2005), will apply as follows in Hunting District 270:

- ☐ **An amended overall population objective of 3,800 elk for HD 270 is proposed. This represents an increase over the objective of 2,600 that was printed in the original Elk Management Plan, later amended to 3,000 in 2007, and further amended to 3,400 in 2013. (This last amendment was never made official, due to FWP staff changes and the break-up of the Bitterroot Elk Working Group in 2013.)**
- ☐ **The objective bull:cow ratio will be raised to 20 bulls: 100 cows, while the objective calf:cow ratio should be amended to represent an acceptable range (20-30 calves: 100 cows; currently 25 calves: 100 cows) rather than a single value.**
- ☐ **The population objective of 3,800 elk will include all elk that are counted during Spring trend counts in HD 270, whether counted on public or private lands, and whether accessible or inaccessible to the hunting public in the Fall.**
- ☐ **FWP will continue to monitor numbers of elk that may be congregated on private land refugia in the Fall and are as such unavailable to the general public during hunting seasons.**
- ☐ **FWP may manage under a “sub-objective” for publicly accessible elk to prevent the overharvest of accessible herd units while elk numbers on private “refugia” continue to grow. Publicly accessible elk may be defined for this purpose as the Spring trend count minus the Fall count of elk on the CB Ranch.**
- ☐ **The “sub-objective” for publicly accessible elk in HD 270 should be 3,000, which is an increase in the sub-objective of 2,600 that was previously amended for HD 270. This sub-objective would direct FWP to prescribe harvest in a manner that would halt the decline of publicly accessible elk while working to increase the harvest pressure that is applied to elk that use the CB Ranch.**

2. Why is the proposed change necessary?

The proposed change is necessary primarily because of the redistricting of HDs 250 and 270, which shifted land from HD 250 into HD 270 (that chunk located west of Highway 93 south of Darby). These boundaries were changed following studies of radio-collared elk which revealed the herds in this segment moved and mingled with elk across the highway in the Sapphires Elk Management Unit (EMU), rather than the West Fork EMU. Approximately 100-450 elk are found in this area during annual surveys (Table 1). As most of this area is public land, these elk should also be added to the public land sub-objective, increasing it from 2,600 to 3,000 as proposed.

The population objective in this hunting district has increased in recent years (from 2,600 to 3,000 to 3,400) as per discussions with the Elk Working Group prior to 2013. The migratory (and typically weather-dependent) nature of the herd into and out of the Big Hole, combined with law enforcement issues, can limit the success of antlerless harvest while increasing pressure on mature bulls. Raising the overall population objective and public land sub-objective while simultaneously raising the objective bull:cow ratio should allow FWP to manage these herds effectively. Also, amending the objective calf: cow ratio to a range of acceptable values (changing from a static 25 calves: 100 cows to a range of 20-30 calves: 100 cows) allows for slight year-to-year variation under variable survey/habitat conditions without necessitating reactive harvest regulation changes.

Very little game damage occurs in this district compared to other districts in the Bitterroot, and ongoing research by FWP suggests high quality elk habitat in HD 270 that may support higher numbers of elk.

Table 1. Elk counts for the Bitterroot Valley, as well as proportion of elk found west of Highway 93, formerly HD 250.

Year	Total elk in HD270 (new boundary)	Elk in old HD 250 section	% in old HD 250 section
2002	2578	383	14.9
2003	3471	421	12.1
2004	2562	336	13.1
2005	3987	488	12.2
2006	4461	326	7.3
2007	3808	200	5.3
2008	3352	53	1.6
2009	3660	133	3.6
2010	3653	172	4.7
2011	3759	164	4.4
2012	3522	190	5.4
2013	4545	159	3.5
2014	4115	287	7.0
2015	4323	265	6.1

3. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

If counting only elk in the old boundaries, the population in HD 270 would be over the 2013 objective (3,400) by 19% (Table 1). With new boundaries, that value increases to 27%. Last year, FWP implemented limited B-licenses designed to target antlerless harvest while preventing law enforcement problems (e.g. "shootouts" in the open following the Big Hole migration); perhaps owing to the new change and errors in printed regulations, however, interest in the B-licenses was low and antlerless harvest was not sufficient to reduce the herd. This situation will be closely monitored in coming hunting seasons and adjusted as necessary.

If the proposed objective is adopted, the current population (in the current boundaries) would be over objective by 14%.

The fall CB Ranch survey has not been flown since 2011 due to turnover in the Bitterroot biologist position; however, elk numbers since 2007 range from 805 elk in 2011 to 1,536 in 2010. FWP staff does plan to fly the ranch again in fall 2015.

4. Provide information related to any weather / habitat factors that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, temperature / precipitation information).

Typical of the Bitterroot Valley, winters for many years have been mild and conducive to a growing elk population. Winterkill has never been a big factor in the Bitterroot Valley. The biggest management challenge is elk that find refuge on private land that does not allow or has very limited hunting. However, the previously mentioned migration from the Big Hole creates a unique management situation, as harsh weather events may trigger this migration and result in a sudden and dramatic influx of hunters.

5. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

FWP met with the Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association on June 8, and a group of local landowners and sportsmen at a public meeting in Darby (at which several representatives from RCFWA were present) on July 7, specific to this proposal. At these meeting, formal consensus was reached to support the proposal for increasing

the overall objective to 3,800 and the sub-objective to 3,000 “publicly accessible elk”, as well as increasing the objective bull:cow ratio from 15 to 20 bulls: 100 cows.

Submitted by _____Rebecca Mowry_____

Date: _____July 9, 2015_____

Approved: _____
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: _____
Name / Date

Reason for modification: